
The Mystery as a Symbolic Idiom — A Buddhist Temple in South China

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Abstract

This essay explores a southern Chinese Buddhist temple as an assembly of symbolic spaces and of objects distributed over these spaces. The symbolic construction is regulated by explicit rules as to distinctions and directions. The objects fill the spaces with a Buddhist story line by clustering elements of Buddhist creeds that are largely unknown to worshippers. These objects have been provided with an artistic form. Taken together, beautiful things and the design of the halls form an aesthetic iconic vision which carries a nebulous moral message. In the temple, exclusive discourse is converted into inclusive iconic displays, theological speculations into demotic transcendental experiences.

Key Words: South China, Buddhism, Temples, Symbolology, Cultural grammars

Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches.

Dies z e i g t sich, es ist das Mystische.

—Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.522.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Pu Ji Shan Yuan 普濟禪院 — ‘Universal Relief Contemplation Hall’ — is a house of worship found in the formerly Portuguese Overseas Province of Macau on the south China coast.¹ Its location within this domain, in the region bordering the mainland, is the result of the expansion of the settlement in 1887, but before that year it was under Chinese rule. As a Buddhist temple and monastery situated in these southern tracts in a coastal and formerly relatively poor area of Guangdong Province,² the establishment is a fairly grand complex of buildings. The temple is devoted to the practice of Buddhism in the particular form known in China as the school of Chan (also indicated by the use of ‘contemplation’ in the name), though theological distinctions between schools of learning and preaching do not seem to worry the general Cantonese worshipper, who seem to have very dim ideas about what Buddhism as a field of organized ideas might eventually turn out to be.

For a long time the Pu Ji temple has been included in the standard trail of tourist sights in the city and in more recent years has seen a great many visitors pass through its halls. My fieldwork in this temple and its monastery dates back to 1965,³ when I spent three very hot summer months there. Since then I have visited the temple as opportunity has offered, the last occasion being in November 2015.⁴ My aim in working there was not so much to find out about Chinese Buddhism as a faith — rather, I nourished a curiosity about systemic symbolism, and my questions were of a fairly straightforward semiotic kind. I wished to learn what had been placed where and why, within the temple’s precincts. I carried out much detailed documentation of halls, gardens, decorations, furniture, and paraphernalia, as well as trying to solicit as much information as I could from the Grand Master, the monks and the resident caretakers. Generally I did not approach members of the public visiting the premises, but

¹ Thanks are due to Virgil K.Y. Ho for suggestions and to Robert Parkin for comments on the text. An outline version was presented at a seminar in ‘Micro-archaeology’ at the University of Gothenburg in 2007. I remain grateful for this opportunity. All words in Cantonese are translated into standard Chinese, using *pinyin* romanization.

² There may well have been some building of wealth in the area because of the proximity of the Portuguese settlement.

³ Fieldwork was conducted in 1965 under the auspices of the then Swedish Research Council for the Humanities. I remain grateful for this support.

⁴ Many things have changed in the fifty years that have passed since I started this research. However, in this paper I use the ethnographic present in the firm belief that the major features I am discussing still exist, even though many new functions have been accommodated on the premises. Effigies have been repainted into a more shining gold and their cabinets have been substituted, more glass offering better views. Many have been removed. All effigies are now, in 2015, behind glass and cannot be touched. The general impression is more colourful.

studied their ritual performances through close observation. I therefore have nothing to say about people's private religious experiences on these visits. Instead, this essay is a modest attempt to point out some dimensions of basic symbolism, features of a simple grammar of image building that may also be of wider importance in 'traditional' Chinese society.

All evidence presented here derives from the inhabitants of the monastery, its employees and its visitors. Part of the reasoning is built also on my own observations and impressions, and my reading of these observations. I have had but little use of reference to a more general Chinese Buddhist encyclopaedia.

Any study of symbolism must be informed by a theory of the human production and use of symbols. The present essay is an exploration of how iconic constructs meet discursive expressions in the shapes of both exegesis, story-line(s) and illustrations. The merger may be seen as resulting in a kind of hybrid phenomenon, the result of the interface between two different ontologies. This needs some further explanation.

An ontology defines the location system by which things and events in the world are to be individuated. It works as a grammar. The expressive realm of an ontology is a code, a device in terms of which clusters of meanings and visions may be represented and thus conveyed into the social scene. The iconic ontology is based on pictorial expressions while the discursive ontology is formed by language and linguistic thought. In the indivisible person several ontologies co-exist simultaneously and may each more abstractly be regarded as an 'order' of the human mind.

One research perspective that follows from this platform concerns human activity in terms of iconic codes in the visionary building of possible worlds, thus forming an imagery understood not by linguistically carried thought, but by cultural intuitions. Iconically encoded information is beyond what can be retrieved introspectively by a speaker's or thinker's verbal thought and linguistic competence. Language and iconology are entirely different sorts of codes, neither being instrumental for reaching into the other.

Textures of complex imagery are brought about by the integration of less inclusive icons into ever more comprehensive clusters. The grammar of such image-making is one of architecture rather than syntax, and it works largely independently of mundane facts.

Thus, iconic image-making makes people's intuitive insights manifest. By being shown, whether temporarily or permanently, such imagery suggests meaningful 'readings' which, in a sense, have neither beginning nor end because what one sees are glimpses of something more comprehensive, quotes from a narration of eternity. Imagery makes known at points in time what exists forever.

The messages produced in an iconic code are dramatically suggestive rather than textually narrative. Veracity in the world of images is established by way of repetition: it is in the lack of

corruption through change that authenticity is established. Complete repetitiveness appears as permanence, and what is permanent has veracity because of its very permanence.

The 'discursive order' concerns intentional performative acts by men and women in a society and their on-going conversation about themselves and the world, including arguments, comments, explanations, exegeses and nonsense. Discursive analysis implies accounting for human acts within an ontology which is a pragmatically construed universe emerging in the communicative interaction of an array of people using language and language-like codes.

We must always keep in mind the fact that the orders discussed here form dimensions of the indivisible person producing expressive symbolism. Needless to say, what is suggested is in the nature of research strategies. We cannot expect unfolding empirical events to be clearly tagged for easy classification in accordance with this or any other preconceived scheme.

The symbolological method can never lead to finally 'proven' results; rather, what we gain are appropriate suggestions, simulacra of the cultural intuitions that members of a society are believed to have. The symbolologist's difficult task is to translate motifs from non-verbal iconic codes into messages of linguistic accounting, from texture into text.⁵

What these brief musings provide is a tentative positioning from which we can take a new look at the South China scene. In the empirical corpus of material which will be discussed in the pages that follow, we will see how a Buddhist temple complex provides a ground for the interface between iconic templates and discursive signs. Depicting, illustrative displays appear here as sets of discursive conventions; they carry messages contributing to the forming of a Buddhist exordium. They include a great number of exegetic and explanatory stories, some of which are annotations to the iconic imagery that is another part of the same temple complex. What is of particular interest here is that many explicit illustrations of Buddhist faith also have an aesthetic dimension that implies a moral understanding and, divorced from their discursive content, the same illustrations form a forceful imaginary world in themselves, to be understood on different grounds. The temple forms an arena in which there is a double flow of symbolism allowing for interfaces between elements of the two basic codes. It is in the light of an anthropologically orientated symbology that I shall conduct the following enquiry.

My aim here is not to give a full description of the appearances and paraphernalia that can be found in the temple halls. In this essay I will just single out the spatial dimension as a *Leitmotiv* that engages both social discourse and iconic imagery. This is thus a limited discussion that will reduce richness to an outline order. The present account should only be seen as a tentative contribution to the understanding of demotic symbolism in southern China.

2. MONKS: SOCIAL BEINGS AND SYMBOLIC BEINGS

⁵ For a somewhat fuller account of this approach, see Aijmer 2001.

In symbological studies we may also need to pursue the study of aspects of a realist operational order. This includes a sociological strategy to explore the formation of groups. The Pu Ji monastery is (in 1965) inhabited by ten monks who then form a social group. They are my main informants. They have all been educated and ordained in monasteries in the Chong Shan area, and in Canton and Fo Shan. The organizing topic around which this group evolves is the maintenance of the sacredness of the buildings and the symbolic forum which the latter frame. It is this dynamic task which explains why they are there. The overarching task generates a number of interlinked duties and works. The monks take care of and arrange various mundane affairs of significance in Buddhist monasteries as well. The most worldly businesses are handled by a small crew of caretakers, some of whom also help in ritual contexts, although this is the main responsibility of the trained, ordained monks, who make up the body of religious virtuosi and provide expertise. Not only do they perform within the temple precincts but also, whenever they are called upon to do so, they go to other places to help as well.

If we look at these activities from the point of view of the ritual acts the monks stage, it is clear that the performers are very much part of what they perform, the rites being impossible to carry out without them. Therefore, in terms of a discursive ontology, the monks are themselves constitutive signs in a flow of performative acts, following choreographed liturgies focused on unison chanting, performances that also make use of visual illustrations and an array of sounds and smells. From yet another perspective they could be seen as supporting pillars in the architecture of image building; what they do and what only they can do as ritual virtuosi produces cultural messages beyond ordinary comprehension, sets of meanings intuited as acts of cosmic management.

3. FROM ENTRANCE TO MAIN HALL

The first spatial arrangement that will strike a visitor to this temple is the grand entrance to the secluded establishment, inviting him or her to penetrate its constituent sequence of galleries. An anthropological view of the temple's lay out suggests the implication of a symbolic progression. To walk through the halls implies a sense of direction, a movement inside a secluded realm, from a first state of general sanctity to one of culminating specific sanctity. Ritual awareness is increased in stages as one passes through the halls along the axis of the temple.

Thus the axis of the temple is built as three major consecutive halls, the two interior ones having open-air courtyards. Unless visitors have come for some specific purpose or are calling on account of some temple festival, people walk quickly through the first two public rooms to reach the third hall, where they pray and offer incense. In the discursive world of exegesis and commentary, spatial progress does not receive much attention, but the passage through the temple offers an increasingly forceful visual experience. A reading of the clustering of 'permanent' symbols and symbolic games contained in the various compartments of the temple will hopefully provide us with some further understanding of the overall process of image-building, the product of which in the mundane world is a Buddhist house of worship.

4. THE ENTRANCE

Thus this Buddhist establishment has three rooms in file along an axis, yet each hall inside the complex has its own theme and thus its own storyline. Seen together they all somehow contribute to a grand overall tale that encompasses the whole temple and monastery. Read together, these various spaces tell in union an existential story — an iconic parable of the nature of death. The temple marks off a realm of apartness, and its interior offers intuitive insights into non-existence as a state of being. The monks themselves, by way of their shaven heads (marking the cranium) and their particular way of dressing, appear on the scene as living signs, as people almost dead. This realm of death has an entrance allowing access to transcendental experiences.

A long time ago a river flowed past the of the temple, probably of geomantic importance in those founding days. Today there is a wall facing the street and behind that a wide open space. Across this courtyard rises the temple. Behind a flight of steps, the entrance is in the middle of a fence-like partition that separates the world inside from mundane life in the here and now. There is a brief area here a few meters in width, a demarcated zone before one passes through the central front door, one of a string of five doors forming the screen wall of the first hall. This zone is the area where roaming demons like to assemble, but here they must stop, not being allowed to penetrate further inside. Wandering ‘hungry ghosts’ congregate at the temple searching for something to quell their sufferings. There is nothing explicit here, no recognized demonifuge to stop the ghosts from entering the premises: it is simply assumed that they will not be able to do so.⁶

It is here, on the far left⁷ as one looks into the hall, that one finds a special sacrificial table devoted to these wandering hungry spiritual guests (*gui* 鬼). The table has a bronze burner for paper offerings, and it is here that, twice a day — early in the morning at six o’clock and in the afternoon at four — a monk provides them with a meal in the form of rice and water. In graceful movements he flings seven grains of rice on the ground and throws water from a glass into a thin film in the air. This place is called Bai Zi Wei 白子位 and it is conventionally placed on the left side of the entrance. The public pays attention to this spot only on festive days, when on leaving the temple, they often put some sticks of incense into the brass bowl on the table.

This zone is thus a screen and a form of protection, but it is also a place where benevolence and benign gifts stream out from the interior of the temple to pacify suffering and suppress evil.

5. THE HALL OF THREE JEWELS

⁶ It was pointed out that a Buddhist temple should in principle have a pair of guardian spirits (in sculptured form) stationed at its main door or in a special entrance building, but Pu Ji Dian has no such an arrangement, nor are there any effigies depicting the Four Heavenly Kings, other protectors of Buddhist temples. On guardian figures in Chinese Buddhist temples, see Prip-Møller 1939, 16-25.

⁷ For clarity of exposition, ‘right’ and ‘left’ in this essay are generally used to describe the directions seen as you enter the buildings and face their interior decorations and arrangements.

Passing through the fence and the portico, one enters a major hall called San Bao Dian 三寶殿 or 'Hall of Three Jewels.' The name refers to the Jewel of the Buddha, the Jewel of the Rule (Dharma) and the Jewel of Monkhood (Sangha). It also refers to the Buddhist triad, the representation of which dominates the hall. There are three big golden Buddha figures by the rear wall. In front of them are two offering tables with various paraphernalia. To the left of the entrance as one walks in is a big drum and on the right side an enormous bronze bell, the oldest object in the establishment, cast in the Chong Zheng reign (1628-44) of the Ming dynasty.

Beneath the central statue, on the floor, is a small Earth God altar. The reason for it being placed here, according to the monks, is entirely geomantic and has nothing to do with the Buddha. It is explained with discursive authority that every building in China must have an Earth God shrine, including Buddhist temples.

The centrepiece of the three Buddha effigies is Shijiamouni Fo 釋迦牟尼佛, or Sakyamuni, who represents the present time. On his left side is Emituo Fo 阿彌陀佛, or Amithaba, who stands for the past, and on his right is Mile Fo 彌勒佛, or Maytreya, representing the future.⁸ The hall is regarded as a superior hall for the Buddha and is also called Da Xiong Bao Dian 大雄寶殿, or 'Supreme Jewel Hall,' this name being written in large characters on a board above the entrance. The hall is said not to be connected to the other halls in the establishment, but to be a closed world of its own. It is here that the Grand Master, or a stand-in monk, performs prayers and a scripture reading at six in the morning and four in the afternoon, both rituals being concluded with offerings to the hungry ghosts. The fact that it is this hall and its arrangements that meets the visitor is said to have no particular significance in terms of the symbolism of the temple layout, supposedly reflecting solely the founder's ideas.

The three major Buddha statues indicate a structure of meanings that seems to pervade the establishment. As one enters, things to one's left are superior to what one finds on the right. The centre line is supreme, being a synthesis of past/left and future/right. These simple categories influence the arrangements in all halls. They are also expressed in rituals: when a group of monks chant together, the Grand Master, or the highest ranking officiant available, will always be at the centre, while those to the right will be inferior to those on the left. The three Buddhas thus also have a time aspect, indicating in their togetherness a total cosmic time in which the past and the future are combined in the supreme present. This is important in trying to understand how the temple caters for both rituals of death (the superior past) and prayers for posterity (the inferior future) within its domain.

There are two other objects in this hall which contribute meaning, the drum and bell already mentioned. These instruments are used in rituals, and their voices are of metaphysical

⁸ A more common display in temples of the Chan school is one in which Yaoshi Fo 藥師佛 represents the future. Yaoshi Fo is a forceful healer associated with the east and the colour blue (Werner 1961, 586-7).

importance,⁹ giving comfort to the suffering souls in hell when played by the monks. When they hear the drum beats and the strokes of the bell, souls in hell instantly forget their torments. There is a rule which applies when using drum and bell called *mu gu, chen zhong* 莫鼓, 晨鐘 or ‘Evening — drum, early morning — bell.’ In the evening the officiant monk strikes the drum first and the bell second. In the morning this is reversed. The *mu gu, chen zhong* rule, I was told, has no reference to the general Chinese *yin/yang* cosmic antonymous opposition. *Yin* 陰 is the female principle permeating the universe, always seen in contrastive combination (in reversed proportionality) with the male *yang* 陽 principle. But then the dynamics of the strokes — *forte* or *piano* — do seem to have such a reference.¹⁰

There is little doubt that implicitly the growing light of the morning (increasing *yang*) is indicated by the first strikes on the right side bell, while the failing light and approaching darkness (increasing *yin*) are greeted by the first stroke on the left side drum of the evening rite. These projections point to an ambiguity in the reading of the symbolism of the hall. Here the negative cosmic principle of *yin* is superior to the positive principle of *yang*. A further implication of this is that in a Buddhist temple death (associated with *yin*) is superior to life (associated with *yang*), a proposition that makes sense within the Buddhist modality of existence.

Thus, as one enters the first hall from the in-between zone where hungry spirits hover, one is confronted with a visual display of the rules that govern the inside of the establishment, otherwise known only by means of a special verbal exegesis. These abstractions, which work as discursive rules, do not seem to be generally known in demotic comprehension. Rather, I suggest, the order perceived by entering visitors is intuited from a reading of the visual splendour which unfolds before them. The worshipper — in my field experience of the mid-1960s — mostly a female and often with little formal education, is likely to be foreign to any explicit rules forming the temple scene, but instead she or he reads the union of the three Buddhas at the rear as an overwhelming message of sanctity and a portal to increasing blessings further inside. The sophistication with which drum and bell are handled¹¹ seems not to be readily understood within the demotic discourse, but their sounds are intuited as forces of blessings within the realm of death. As visual objects, however, drum and bell do not attract much interest.

But in one case abstract structures have actually been recognized and negotiated. Just in front of the huge statue of Shijiamouni Fo someone, at some distant point in time, has placed three much smaller figurines which the Grand Master identifies as three Daoist deities — Shang Yuan 上元, Zhong Yuan 中元 and Xia Yuan 下元. He says that they have been installed there

⁹ On the importance of bells and drums in Chinese Buddhism, see Gray 1875, 48; Prip-Møller 1939, 7-16, 358, 360-1.

¹⁰ Much more could be said about this, but it would fall outside the scope of this essay.

so that certain worshippers coming to the hall can venerate their own gods. Recognized as ‘foreign,’ they are still tolerated. He claims that there are no relationships between this Daoist triad and the three Buddhas. And yet, Shang Yuan is placed at the centre, Zhong Yuan on the left and Xia Yuan on the right. In the popular Daoist view, the three gods represent the principles of Heaven, Earth and Water, bestow happiness, remit sins and protect from evil. They are also reputed to send down good and ill fortune of men and to save the lost. In Daoist learned hagiography things are, not unexpectedly, even more complex (see, for instance, Werner 1932, 401).

Here in the Pu Ji temple, Buddhist exegesis denies any relationship between the triad of Buddhas, sitting against the back wall of the first hall, and the Daoist triad of the ‘Three Principal Rulers’ installed in front of them, but the foreign gods are still accepted as part of the imagery. Despite the denial, the iconological similarity between the two triads points to some sort of connection. Shang Yuan at the centre is associated with Shijiamouni Fo, also at the centre, who in turn represents the present and supreme synthesis. Shang Yuan gives these abstract qualities a spatial dimension while pointing to Heaven. Zhong Yuan is placed beneath Emituo Fo, who stands for the past and thereby points to Earth as the domain of what has been achieved and which is superior to the future. Mile Fo is to the right as one faces the statues, and beneath him is the Ruler of Water, who points to what is not yet known and is therefore inferior. Bringing the two triads together is less a discursive way of debating the enigmatic structure of a time/space than, in terms of iconic construction, a merger — everything in the world brought together. The combination of the two triads works as an image of all-encompassing fate, and of a hope that fate can be handled. The small Daoist figures in front of the imposing Buddhas add a dimension of the intuitive meaning of fate building.¹²

6. HALL OF THE LONG LIFE BUDDHA

The second main hall in the establishment is of a different character. It is only rarely used, and then only for private ceremonies. It is a place which people pass through, although it is filled with ritual paraphernalia for prayers and sacrifices spread over its offering tables and has engaging mural paintings. At the back rests a sizeable golden Buddha, designated the Long Life Buddha or Chang Shou Fo 長壽佛. It was emphasized that there is no name for this Buddha.

This Buddha is of little importance for worshippers, and few offer gifts of sandal wood, incense or fruit here. In the overall design of the monastery, leading back to its early foundation, this Buddha and his hall form a metonymic link with a mother establishment in Canton, whence the founder monk is supposed to have come in the late Ming dynasty. The mother institution is the

¹² In addition, according to the Grand Master, the fact that Chong Yuan is placed not at the centre, as his name seems to indicate that he should (‘Middle Origin’), but to one side of Shang Yuan in the middle suggests that placing the Daoist triad here implied a negotiation favouring inherent qualities rather than Daoist conventions. Today, in 2015, the three idols have been removed.

Long Life Monastery in suburban Canton.¹³ It is also reported that, in the Kang Xi period (1662-1723) of the Qing dynasty, the Grand Master of the Canton temple moved to Macau to take up the same position in the Pu Ji Monastery. Throughout history, up to the 1950s, mutual visits have constantly been paid between the two monasteries. Whether there were also other monasteries involved in a network is unclear to me.¹⁴ What is of interest here is that this Buddha in the second hall has no particular local purpose, nor is he associated with any distinct beliefs or functions, apart from marking the hall as a Buddhist public room and perhaps also as a sort of anti-chamber to the next hall. Some rituals concerned with birthdays — celebrations of long life — are performed here.

The two sides of the hall are also marked here in that on the left as one enters a drum hangs from the ceiling, with a bell hanging on the other side as a counterpart. Their sounds are seldom heard in the hall.

More demotic thoughts connected with this hall concern the open courtyard and its two symmetrically planted trees. Between the trees is a bronze vessel where paper offerings may be burnt, and each tree has its own box for receiving incense sticks. By the left tree is a red oil lamp for lighting such objects. Around the stems of these two trees are tied various cords and objects which are attached there by young lovers who fear they will lose their partner. The stems are full of these cords. The explanation given by the Grand Master is that the trees are of a species which has only one trunk — ‘a sign of one heart.’ It is also likely that the place where they grow gives them a sanctity, which in turn provides efficacy.¹⁵

The hall of the Long Life Buddha connotes mundane life and seems to bring impulses of a life force to those who seek it here. Love magic and prolongation of life are topoi that are united in the symbolic theme of this area. But there is more to it than that. The Long Life Buddha hall is there to separate the third hall from the first, a sort of nowhere of minor and undefined ritual observances. Somehow the sanctity of the Guan Yin sphere of the next hall must be kept apart from that of the Three Jewels.

7. THE HALL OF GUAN YIN

The third and main hall in the central axis also opens with a courtyard, which leads to a short flight of steps affording entrance to the elevated hall. The approach is marked by two big bronze burners for paper offerings. Immediately to the right of the entrance is a bronze bell, but no drum appears as a counterpart on the left side. Instead, here is a shop for various ritual paraphernalia. The divinities housed in this hall are all kept locked in glass-fronted cabinets and

¹³ This is likely to be the Chang Shou Si 長壽寺 of the Canton Western Suburbs described by Gray 1875, 242-5. The arrangement of halls there shows a similarity with the Macau Pu Ji Dian.

¹⁴ The same monk, Shi Lian Da Shan 石廉大汕, who set up the Macau temple is said to be the founder of yet another Buddhist establishment, in Qingyuan 清遠, north of Canton. Whether there have been any contacts with this Qingyuan monastery remains unclear.

¹⁵ Temples in Canton have had similar arrangements of planted trees; see Gray 1875, 49, 80-2, 264-5.

so cannot be touched. As one looks into the hall, the central position at the back is occupied by the altar of Guan Yin 觀音.

Guan Yin occupies the supreme position in the main hall, from which she dominates the ritual scene. She is the goddess of mercy and attracts many women to worship her, and a few men too. A protector of individuals in life, a psychopomp in death and a provider of children, she is widely held to be a most benign deity and receives much worship on festive days. In Buddhist discourse she is a *bodhisattva*, a female incarnation of Avalokitesvara. In a hagiographical sense she is an extremely complex figure, changing character through the ages (see, for instance, Werner 1932 225-227). This is of little concern for present purposes, and suffice it to say here that she is a divine figure with somewhat nebulous functions. In the third hall she appears in her cabinet as empress-like, an effigy dressed in and surrounded by precious embroidered silks and without any sign of meekness. Her head wears a fringed crown. At feasts enormous amounts of food and incense are offered, including whole roast piglets and other foods that are definitely not of a Buddhist character. There is a strong stress on her supreme position at the focal point of the temple.

On the right hand side of the Guan Yin altar, as you enter the hall, is a glass cabinet filled with a great many effigies of all sorts and of unknown identity. They are sort of votive gifts by worshippers. On the other, left hand side, is another glass cabinet containing an effigy of uncertain characteristics.

Along the two side walls of the room are two long cabinets, each containing nine of the total of eighteen *lo han* that together occupy an important place in both demotic and expert Buddhist thought. They are of *arhat* status, of varying backgrounds, and are supposed to have reached enlightenment and be saved for all eternity. People coming to the temple would, according to the catetakers, certainly regard them collectively as a benign assembly of immortals. There is nothing in the two sets of effigies that seems to indicate that the one on the left (looking into the hall) is superior to the other set on the right wall, even if in theory they are. The monks are uncertain. The effigies are there, perhaps, more to frame the Guan Yin altar and its three offering tables, than to make manifest structural order. In this respect the arrangement is enigmatic as there seems to be nothing in the display or exegesis of the *lo han* that indicates a discrimination. Rather, each of them is seen as an isolated individual.¹⁶

To the left of the steps leading from the courtyard into the hall is a small sculptured tiger and, on the other side, a corresponding dragon. They seem to indicate opposite cosmic forces, *yin* and *yang*, and their balance in the location of the temple. However, in conversation all such connotations were denied. The tiger (in this 'iconic situation' indicating the *yin* principle)

¹⁶ In a grand Buddhist temple in the Province of Zhejiang, it is said that the eighteen *lo han*, there also located in the main hall, in their togetherness represented 'the collective assembly of believers around the Master' (Hackmann 1902, 175). Something similar may have been implied in the Macau Pu Ji temple, but this is speculation.

attracts the intermittent attention of worshippers and people burn incense sticks in his honour, while the dragon (indicating *yang*) seems to be ignored most of the time. The tiger is the White Tiger, a fabulous creature of great ambiguity. In springtime he receives offerings of pork meat on certain days, and his mouth is often smeared with fat. At that time he is supposed to open his mouth wide open, thereby causing trouble among people, like quarrels and arguing. Filling his mouth with food prevents him from biting.¹⁷

8. LATERAL HALLS TO THE LEFT

As one enters the temple, there is the option to explore three halls alongside the three main axis halls. There is a Tian Hou Hall, a Western Hall and a Hell Hall. They are on the superior side of the temple complex, and again their insides are structured into the same division, separating inferiority and superiority, and with the middle as the supreme synthesis.

The first side hall to the left is devoted to the goddess Tian Hou 天后. She is a sailors' divinity who protects seafarers, as well as being a provider of children, like Guan Yin herself. On the altar she is flanked on one side by a figure who can see at a distance of one thousand *li*, and on the other side by one who can hear from afar. Obviously they help Tian Hou to watch over human affairs. Again, like Guan Yin, Tian Hou has celestial associations.¹⁸ The cult of this deity is strong along the coasts of south-eastern China, especially in Zhejiang, Fujian and Taiwan, and among the Min-speaking populations spread out along the coastline, including Macau. It would seem that the installation of this goddess here in this hall is something of a Fujianese marker, the establishment being owned and run by the Macau Fujian Fellow Villagers Association, and Tian Hou very much being emblematic for this group of people, early settlers here. Why the hall of this deity appears on the superior left-hand side in a sequence that brings together Tian Hou, ancestral souls and Hell, is not very clear, apart from the circumstance that her status is female and thus she is associated with the feminine principle of *yin*, which in turn is connected with the west, darkness, and death.

The next room in order is the Western Hall, sometimes referred to as the Soul Hall. It got its name, so it is explained, from its direction and the Buddhist idea that the dead always return to the west. What is referred to here is the idea of a Western Paradise. This is a hall where the clients of the temple can deposit their ancestor tablets into the care of the monks. The walls are all dressed with ancestral tablets. There are many reasons why people might despair in looking after their forefathers, and the temple is an outlet that can solve such distress. Also, it is pointed out, people who convert to Christianity are prone to deposit their ancestral tablets here. The walls are covered with small tablets of a fairly similar size, although there are also some more

¹⁷ The tiger and the dragon have now, in 2015, been removed to the sides of the offering table in front of the altar, seemingly into less prominent positions.

¹⁸ On Tian Hou's hagiography, see, for instance, Gray 1875, 172-9; Werner 1932, 503; Yang 1961, 72-4; Watson 1985; Feuchtwang 1992, 82-3.

prominent ones. They are generally green in colour. It is certainly a chamber of death. Here are also kept the soul tablets of deceased monks.

The Hell Hall contains a statue of the ruler of Hell — Di Zang Wang 地藏王 (Kshitigarbha) — on the back wall (Werner 1932, 497-9; Soothill and Hodous 1937, 208). He is flanked by a supervisor of good and another of evil. Di Zang is a saviour, bringing souls out of Hell. In the two side cabinets are the effigies of the Ten Kings of Hell.¹⁹

On the left hand side-wall is another cabinet which contains Bai Wu Chang 白無常, a runner of Hell. Whereas Guan Yin is a benign psychopomp, Bai Wu Chang is a rather contrasting figure who collects the souls in the world to transfer them to Hell. He is regarded as corrupt and is dressed in a colourless sackcloth, a dress reminiscent of a mourning costume. One hand raises a writing brush, indicating that he is some sort of scribe or keeper of records, while the other holds a board with the message: 'Good and Evil are Clearly Distinguished.' At his feet are found banknotes and special 'ritual money' bank notes (drawn on the Bank of Hell) that have been inserted into the cabinet as bribes for him to be lenient to particular souls.²⁰ The hall is mainly used for various rituals connected with death and depicts the judgements awaited in death, thus making manifest that realm's undesirability.

9. LATERAL HALLS TO THE RIGHT

To the right, seen as one enters the temple from the front court, are three halls which form a complex contrasting with those on the left side. Parallel to the Tian Hou Hall is a Guan Di Hall devoted to the worship of the god of warfare and wealth. Guan Di 關帝 is in demotic hagiography²¹ a canonized general active in the period of Three Kingdoms (221—80) and also a well-known character in Chinese drama. He is a paragon of loyalty. His martial background has led to his being worshipped as a slayer of demons, but he has also become the traders' god, worshipped in every store in Hong Kong and Macau. He is furthermore seen as a provider of personal wealth. In answer to my question as to how he could be related to Buddhism and find a prominent place in a temple like this, I was told that he converted to Buddhism on his deathbed. And this was well known. Guan Di is very commonly found in Buddhist houses of worship, most often as a protector and, as in this monastery, placed near the entrance (Prip-Møller 1939, 204).

In the monks' exegesis this shrine is separate from what is found on the other side of the temple, and yet on other occasions they maintain that the two 'halves' of the temple were constructed in this way to represent the *yin/yang* distinction. From an outsider's point of view, it seems more

¹⁹ Prip-Møller (1939, 195) argues that generally in Chinese Buddhist monasteries Hells are not an integral part of the big monastic layout. They are found very seldom and do not influence the general plan. He notes that Hells are found much more frequently in Daoist monasteries.

²⁰ Much could be said about this figure; see Werner 1932, 568-9.

²¹ See further Gray 1875, 226-33; Werner 1932, 227-30; and ter Haar 1999.

likely that the Guan Di effigy was installed here, on the *yang* side, as a counterpart to the Tian Hou statue on the other side of darkness. He is male, forcefully active, kills but also provides worldly wealth. He is very much focussed on the life people live as a protector and a benefactor. Guan Di makes manifest the presupposition for this part of the temple establishment in that he represents protection and protection of life in contrast to death.

To the right is also a spacious ceremonial hall used for events of some dignity, like the nightly ‘masses’ during the Yulanhui 盂蘭會 (Ullambala) festival in late summer, when the roaming souls escape from the hells to revisit the earth they once trod. On such occasions the hall is decorated with antique scroll paintings depicting the Buddhist triad. Here in this part of the establishment are also the living quarters of the monks and the Grand Master, including their refectory. There is also a room for receiving guests and a garden for pleasure and contemplation. One of the features of this garden, significantly, is a small tree which has been trimmed through the centuries into the complex shape of the luck-generating Chinese character *shou* 寿 or ‘long life.’ Everything on this side of the central temple axis is connected with life and *yang* force, in contrast with the other side. Living monks are contrasted with dead monks, living people with dead people, life blessings with hells and food with hunger. When the hungry ghosts invade the temple at Yulanhui, they do not go to the hell side (whence they actually come) but to the life side, where they are celebrated and placated in the sphere of the spiritual vigour of the eastern domain. This is on the side of the Future and its promises.

10. THE GRAMMAR OF THE COMPASS

The three main halls each have a special set of stone tiles in the centre of the floor in the form of a framed rectangle. This is the place for the casting of divining blocks.²² But these stone rectangles are also a key to understanding yet another spatial dimension of this house of worship, revealing the capacity of a temple to create its own universe.

As one enters the first hall from the front gate, one enters a universe formed around one presupposition — the presence of the state of death. Practically everything inside this realm has something, if only remotely, to do with the sphere of physical extinction and possible rebirth.

This universe has two categorically defined sides, one orientated towards the west marking ‘death in death’ (or *yin* in *yin*), and one to the east expressing ‘life in death’ (*yang* in *yin*). The border line between the two, both in terms of the middle set of halls and the line of the central axis within each hall, forms a synthetic and thus superior category. In terms of the symbolic grammar of directions, explicitly so in the use of the term of ‘west’, the main temple hall devoted to the Guan Yin *bodhisattva* places that divine being at the northernmost wall, facing south, like all major deities inside the establishment. This conforms to a well-known conventional arrangement in all sorts of spatial planning and architecture in China, where an axis from north to south defines architectural plans and decorative features in terms of their

²² For more information on such forecasting procedures, see, for instance, Jordan 1972, 61–4.

orientation in space. This basic location in accordance with the magnetic compass is found everywhere — in cities, towns, villages, residences, temples and ancestral halls. Of course, topography may interfere and suggest compromise, as may suggestions of geomancy or *feng shui* 風水, but surprisingly often the compass rules. One well-known example is the village of ‘Kaihsienkung’ in Jiangsu Province, where all residential houses have their main entrances facing south (Fei 1939, 67). The outline of the historical centres of big cities like, for instance, Peking and Soochow follows the same pattern, as do the plans of a great many other less important places.

Returning to the Pu Ji temple in Macau and its divinatory arrangements on the floors, there is a discovery to be made. If one were to place a real world magnetic compass over the pattern of stone tiles, it will be found that the diagonal of the rectangle points to the north. The whole complex is orientated in an axis from northeast to southwest, and what is regarded as the Western Hall is actually situated in the north-western direction of the compass. What we see in this is that inside the temple and monastery another ‘modal’ compass prevails. It follows that this universe, making manifest a Buddhist sphere of death, is a possible world materialized and of its own order. Inside the temple, the compass of the temple defines its directions, which in this case are different from those that rule the mundane outside world.

I suggest that this is connected with a cultural grammar that has generated architectural forms for centuries. The inside world of Chinese buildings and urban spaces are organized in terms of their built-in order of directionality. This is perhaps a bold statement, and it is largely as yet a proposition in need of further verification. What I suggest is that in future studies we may examine the ethnography for ‘hidden’ clues and markers to see in what ways unseen implicit compasses have contributed to the expressive regulation of social life.

The Pu Ji temple was built into the landscape the way it was for geomantic reasons. As already mentioned, at some earlier period a river flowed in front of the complex, which no doubt contributed to what is still regarded as a very good location. The river has since disappeared, but good *feng shui* is said to have lasted.²³

11. AFTERTHOUGHTS

In this short and incomplete essay, I have focused on three sets of distinctions made in the context of a Buddhist house of worship. One interest has been to see how iconic templates and expressions relate to discursive notions, signs and exegeses.

As one crosses the threshold into the Buddhist temple and monastery of Pu Ji Shan Yuan, one enters a universe marked by the presupposition of the constant presence of death. As one walks through the halls, from the entrance to the altar of Guan Yin, one passes through stages of ritual

²³ On *feng shui* and Buddhist architecture in China, see further Prip-Møller 1939, 6-7.

intensity, from an all-encompassing proclamation of hopeful faith through a separating space with reference to mundane life into a realm of ambiguity, combining death with the promise of new life.

In the middle of this axis there is a separation of the first hall and the third hall by a neutralizing second hall. The sanctities of the first and third halls must be kept apart. It seems that the first hall's theme concerns the force of death, while the Guan Yin hall is a place for the celebration of life force — a strong motif here being the deity as a provider of children.

As has been remarked several times, there is one fundamental structure of superiority/inferiority involved in every single hall and room of the complex of buildings. There is also a synthesizing middle line between the two zones combining the respective qualities of both. This border stands for a totalizing supremacy. As one enters a building the superior side is to the left and is associated further with the western cardinal point and with death. In contrast the other side connotes the east, life and vigour. Within the realm of death life force is inferior. This division is repeated in every single room, but is also the principle for comprehending the layout of the building complex, its halls on the left being superior to those on the right, and the axis of central halls being superior.

What is puzzling is the rigidity of the system. In most southern Chinese contexts the general dualism of *yin* and *yang* brings cosmic forces into a graded antonymous relationship, the increase in one diminishing the impact of the other. But not so here. And yet the Buddhist world of complementary relationships is somehow embedded into a more general Chinese world view dominated by antonymous relationships. This Buddhist universe is clearly demarcated behind walls and inside houses. Its presuppositions are a special version of death as temporary and a notion of life as a continuous thread through existences. We are dealing here with a cultural modality which is different from ordinary mundane existence and also from other culturally constructed universes. In the Buddhist world dichotomous complementarities prevail. In the interface between them the contrasts generate a third synthesizing and mediating category, which, being both opposites brought together in unity, dominates the parent categories and rules supreme.

In principle, so it seems, the *yin/yang* antonymous relation is excluded from the message-building of the temple. And yet it creeps into its premises from the surrounding mundane world. One example mentioned above is the twofold notions surrounding the drums and bells on the premises. Other pointers are the presence of the tiger and the dragon, and also the female Tian Hou and the male Guan Di deities as markers of the west and east respectively. These features seem to be linked with a general cosmology dominating the outside world, but once inside the walls they seem to conform to the primary grammar of the temple. The Pu Ji Grand Master explained that in a bigger monastery there will always be an expression of the directions in the presence of sculptures of the Four Heavenly Kings, in combination with some Mount Meru (centre) symbol, perhaps a *daogoba*. Such examples are, of course, more indicative than conclusive, and here we need more comparative studies. The main figures on altars are

generally flanked by side figures, but the latter seem more like aspects of the centrally placed divinity than independent entities representing cardinal directions, or superiority versus inferiority. It is not obvious that sight is superior to hearing. Such arrangements do not seem to form triads.

The triadic constellations which also play a part in the grammar of this Buddhist temple are certainly expressive versions of the basic dichotomy, including its synthesis. A triad is, then, not only articulated in discursive abstract categories, but also, as an impressive vision, it provides forms and colours united in physical objects — an imagery indicating the nature and order of the world. Divine effigies articulate three-fold ideas in various ways, referring to rooms, hall arrangements and cosmological truths. In the expressive order the basic Buddhist notions can be further improved upon, expanded, by the introduction of Daoist effigies,²⁴ who, when tacked on to the basic structure, widen the field of connotations and thus modify the provinces of cultural meaning, encompassing further possibilities.

Prip-Møller (1939, 206), in his discussion of a major monastery in Jiangsu province, makes the interesting observation that the main triad is not fixed in its composition. If the effigies are placed at the entrance front side of a hall, the side figures change place with regard to the central Shijiamouni Fo, namely being reversed. These positions are thus not defined by the central figure. Rather, the side figures are each strongly associated with one direction of the compass and the structural loci must not be changed ungrammatically when the figures face the other way round. Whether such a shift of side also changes the effigies' relations with what is superior and inferior is not known. The comparative insight from this observation is that westerly and easterly directions are the formative categories in the generative process. This would suggest that inferiority and superiority are abstract manifestations of an east/west dichotomy. The synthetic line of dominance is then also a representation of the north—south axis.

This leads us to a consideration of the compass. The temple as a modal cultural universe is independent of the order of the mundane world, and so has its own built-in compass which may be different from the magnetic one of the outside realistic world. Inside it is the walls of the building which define what is north and south, east and west. The hall called the Western Hall is to the west because it was built to be to the west, given the axis

[Guan Yin altar ⇔ entrance]

as defining what is north and south. The ideal is, it may be suggested, that the two compasses show the same directions, but if topography and geomantic considerations have made it necessary to negotiate the location of the building, the inside maintains the ideal compass — in fact, it denies the existence of the order of the outside world.

²⁴ As mentioned, in 2015 the Daoist triad was found to have been removed from their former place in front of the Buddhas of the first hall.

Prip-Møller (1939, 206) found something similar in his study of a grand monastery in Jiangsu. He notes that

This 'east' and 'west,' however, must not be taken literally as meaning the actual geographical aspect of the hall. It has, in fact, nothing to do with this, although most temples and monasteries in China have a southern exposure which automatically places the east on Buddha's left hand. In monastic language the side of the left of the Buddha on the main altar will always be the east, and that on his right hand the west.

This 'monastic language' seems to follow a set of notions combining similarly to those we have noted as defining a discursive modality referring to the compass. Again, describing a Buddhist temple in Nanking, Prip-Møller (1939, 40) mentions in passing 'the (monastic) East side'; this, I think, might be a further indication of an internal compass similar to what has been discussed here.

The present account of the Pu Ji temple does not do much justice to its rich contents. Its halls must not be understood as nothing more than a sort of abstract cosmic diagram translated into a factual arrangement forming a cultural modality at variance with the 'normality' of the south China world. These spaces contain so many objects and features in so many combinations that, in their togetherness, they provide a symbolic realm beyond what could be verbally described, a realm of mysterious potency that is known because it is manifest as a totality of symbolic force.

Very many details have been left out of the present account, such as the wealth of colours, from the golden and bronze tones of the Buddha figures to the red, yellow, black and gold of the altars and offering tables. One could also mention the elegant decorative patterns around the altars and tables, and the intricate and intriguing scenes carved in wood, lacquered in gleaming gold or red on the fronts of the altars and tables. Offering tables carry enormous vases and incense burners, serving to intensify the sanctity of the halls. Colourful lanterns with large characters are suspended in the ceilings. There are also the green colours of potted lotus plants, trees and ancestral tablets, and the shifting light between sunshine and darkness.²⁵ All over there is a prevailing scent of incense sticks.

The temple is filled with a multitude of little statuettes, spread around on altars, minor replicas of the major figures, godlings of unknown function, name and origin, some colourful, others in red-lacquered wood or in gold. The major effigies have side figures and an array of attributes on display. The figurines form a cavalcade of mysterious beings who are all potential sources of blessings.

It could be added here, perhaps as an invitation to further research, that things are changed. There has been a reshuffling of items in the temple halls and the number of visitors has increased. The number of ancestor tablets deposited has grown so that they are now, in 2015, placed also on the life-giving side of the halls where, in terms of traditional iconology, they

²⁵ For some further thoughts on temple decorations, see Eberhard 1971.

would be an ungrammatical distortion. No doubt there are discursive remedies for this invasion of death into life. The daily ceremonies for the hungry ghosts at the entrance are no longer conducted and the monks wear a different style of clothes. The atmosphere is different. The conservative force of the iconic grammar to produce robust imagery has not withstood entirely the stream of constant change in social life and its ongoing discourses.

This Buddhist universe springs from a particular discourse handled by ritual experts. It forms a body of knowledge that is beyond lay understanding and yet implicitly forms a demotic comprehension. The virtuoso discourse is translated into an iconic, visionary experience by the creation of an array of illustrative objects placed in a certain order — an order which is a construct based on the cultural grammar of the Buddhist idiom. The systemic distribution of effigies and other objects into a cluster of spaces gives rise to intuitive readings for the visitors, who will learn and get to know about the nature of existence through watching this cluster of elements combined in this symbolic architecture. What we are dealing with is a case of ‘reversed exegesis’ — what is expressed in language, in terms precise and categorical, becomes divorced from all discursive arguments and propositions; an exordium is turned into a realm of nebulous aesthetics, and thereby a field of implicational ethics, a vision impressing upon the beholder the tenets of an overwhelming existential veracity and its morals (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.421).

These secluded halls of death provide a hope for life and coming life for both the self and the community. The concluding suggestion is that, in the climax of synthetic ambiguity — the splendour of the altar of Guan Yin — we may have a glimpse of the iconic force that carries Buddhist ethics in demotic life in southern China. By taking in the grandeur, worshippers attune themselves to a morality that emerges out of the subdued beauty of the visions of the halls. Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same

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